

**A NEW ROMAN VILLA NEAR
MALMESBURY
WILTSHIRE**

For

ENTREPOSE INDUSTRIAL SERVICES

on behalf of

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A NEW ROMAN VILLA NEAR MALMESBURY WILTSHIRE

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**A New Roman Villa near
Malmesbury, Wiltshire**

by Jonathan Hart, Mark Collard and Neil Holbrook¹

with contributions by A.D.H. Bartlett and E. M. McSloy

Fieldwalking, geophysical survey and excavation associated with the construction of a new gas pipeline in 2001 revealed a previously unrecorded Roman villa, 1.5km north-east of Malmesbury.

In 2001 National Grid Transco constructed a high pressure gas pipeline between Easton Grey and Minety in north Wiltshire, a distance of approximately 15km (Figure 1). Cotswold Archaeological Trust (now Cotswold Archaeology) was commissioned by Entrepose Industrial Services Limited to undertake a watching brief and targeted excavation during the construction of the pipeline. A summary report on the results of the programme of recording along the whole length of the pipeline was subsequently produced (Cotswold Archaeological Trust 2002). The purpose of this note is to present the evidence for a previously unrecorded Roman villa discovered near Marsh Farm, 1.5km north-east of the centre of Malmesbury. No other significant discoveries were made elsewhere on the route.

PRELIMINARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEYS

As part of the planning and design process for the pipeline, Transco commissioned a staged assessment of the potential archaeological impact of the scheme. A desk-

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based study concluded that no known sites of archaeological interest would be directly affected by the proposed route (Network Archaeology 2000). A second stage programme of archaeological fieldwalking, field reconnaissance, and geophysical survey was undertaken in 2001 (Network Archaeology 2001; Bartlett 2001a). At ST 9440 8840 fieldwalking recovered 54 sherds of Roman pottery, and the geophysical survey revealed a dense concentration of anomalies indicative of pits and ditches, combined with raised levels of magnetic susceptibility. A copper-alloy Roman brooch was also recovered from the surface of the field during the latter exercise. A watching brief during the laying of a telecommunications cable in the north-west part of this field recovered dressed stone, tesserae, roof tile and pottery indicative of a high status Romano-British building, most probably a villa (Network Archaeology 2001, 12). In the light of these results it was recommended that a full geophysical survey be undertaken to define the extent of the remains with a view to re-routing the pipeline away from the most significant part of the villa.

Magnetometer Survey

by A.D.H. Bartlett

A full magnetometer survey carried out of two fields in April 2001 followed standard procedures for work of this kind. Readings were collected along transects 1m apart using Geoscan fluxgate magnetometers. Fairly complete coverage of the site was achieved, although some waterlogged ground and areas obstructed by spoil from the fibre optic cable trench at the north of the field were excluded. A full report on the survey has been prepared (Bartlett 2001b). The results of the magnetometer survey are shown as a grey scale plot in Figure 2. Additional 2D low pass filtering has been applied to this plot to reduce background noise levels and emphasise features of dimensions suitable to be archaeologically significant. The magnetometer survey was

supplemented by a magnetic susceptibility survey with readings taken using a Bartington MS2 meter and field sensor loop (Figure 3).

The magnetometer plot shows a dense cluster of ditched enclosures in the centre of the larger field (A), with an area of very strong magnetic activity to the east (B). The enclosures appear to be of more than one phase, and correspond with a region of raised susceptibility readings which is likely to indicate a settlement site.

Other such features appear to be present towards the east and south east of the larger field, but here there are also areas of strong magnetic activity (B). It is therefore likely that the debris from the main Roman buildings includes sufficient burnt clay, probably from the remains of a hypocaust or roof tiles, to create strong magnetic disturbances. Features detected in other parts of the survey include comparatively weak linear anomalies in the southern part of the field, and scattered pit-like magnetic anomalies towards the west. It is conceivable that a cluster of archaeological features represented by the magnetic anomalies at H might represent archaeological features, but they could equally be of geological origin as was subsequently found to be the case with the disturbances towards the north of the site at J. Anomalies alongside the B4040 at the southern edge of the field could be of recent rather than archaeological origin. The field to the south-east of the B4040 contains a number of linear ditch-like features, one of which (L) appears to form the southern boundary of an enclosure surrounding the main villa site. Parallel markings which could indicate traces of ridge and furrow, or which may perhaps relate to more recent ploughing, have been detected in various parts of the site.

THE VILLA SITE

The villa lay upon a spread of gravel that sloped gently down from 92.5m AOD in the north-west of the field to 81m AOD in the south-east corner. The gravel substrate

may have been a factor in the good quality of the magnetometer results, for where the gravel gave way to clay to the south-west of the villa site the geophysical results were less good (they did not detect some post-medieval ditches in Area 3 for instance). To the north-east of the villa the ground falls away into a small valley occupied by a stream which drains south-eastwards to a confluence with the Bristol Avon. The site lies on the northern limit of the north Wiltshire clay vale, with the limestone of the southern Cotswolds outcropping on the other side of the stream. It is just within the parish of Malmesbury, the north-eastern side of the field forming the parish boundary with Charlton.

THE EXCAVATION

Methodology

As a result of the information obtained from the surveys the pipeline was re-routed to avoid the main concentration of plotted features (Figure 2). A 5m-wide machine-cut trench was excavated across part of two fields, and this was widened out to the full 25m width of the pipeline construction corridor where archaeological features were encountered. The excavation was sub-divided into a number of areas, of which Areas 2, 3 and 5 contained archaeological features. All areas were machine-stripped to the top of the natural substrate, with archaeological excavation continuing by hand thereafter. Archaeological features were found in three areas labelled Areas 2, 3 and 5 on Figure 2.

Area 2 (Figure 4)

The magnetometer survey identified ditched enclosures in this area, and during excavation a number of smaller features that did not appear on the plot were also

found. The fills from these features comprised characteristically dark loams and contained moderate quantities of artefactual material.

Enclosure 629 consisted of a row of small ditched paddocks, measuring approximately 11m by 15m, which are visible on the geophysical survey extending beyond the excavated area to the north-west. No entrance was found for the paddock which lay fully within the excavation area. The paddocks were cut by ditch 628 which formed part of a playing card-shaped enclosure clearly visible on the geophysics. The upper fills of both of these ditch systems contained demolition material from the villa buildings including stone and ceramic roof tiles, box flue tiles, brick, and tesserae.

Two possible enclosures lay to the west of the paddocks. In both cases it is likely that the ditches were originally more complete, only fragments having survived the effects of ploughing. Two crescent-shaped ditches enclosing a sub-rectangular space approximately 7m x 5m defined possible enclosure 258, and a single arc enclosure 267. Likely interpretations for both features include stock pens or drip gullies for agricultural buildings. The small number of pits and post-holes identified within or immediately adjacent to enclosure 258 contained no finds and their association with the enclosure is undetermined

Area 3 (Figure 5)

Area 3 contained three trackways, two phases of field systems and a four-post structure. In contrast to Area 2, the features were filled with clean silts and contained few finds. Only trackway 457 was identified by geophysics. This ran along a slight gravel ridge towards the villa buildings. The trackway was defined by two parallel drainage ditches 8.5m apart, which had been re-cut at least once. No evidence for any surfacing was recovered. Two smaller trackways, 456 and 458, were also defined by paired ditches. Field system 450 consisted of an irregular network of ditches defining and draining land plots on the clay substrate to the south-east of the

main trackway. The recut of one of the trackway ditches drained into one of these field ditches indicating their contemporaneity. The field system was replaced by ditched enclosure 449 which, although its full extent was not ascertained, may have been similar to the playing card-shaped enclosure identified in Area 2. Four-post structure 454 was located to the north-west of the main trackway. It is undated but similar features have been found on other Romano-British sites where they are interpreted as raised-floor granaries (Morris 1979, 31). Although no further structures were identified within Area 3, this is more likely to reflect the limited nature of the excavations. It is conceivable that the granary was associated with further timber structures.

Area 5 (not illustrated)

Two contemporary ditches exposed in this area corresponded to features identified on the magnetometer plot.

Chronology of the Excavated Features

The lower fills of the ditches of enclosure 629 produced pottery which is broadly datable to the period from the 2nd to 4th century AD. The latest material comprises South-East Dorset BB1 cooking-pots and local copies with flared everted rims indicative of manufacture in the 3rd or 4th centuries. The upper fills of the enclosure ditches produced an Oxfordshire colour-coated bowl with stamped rosette decoration (Young 1977 form C84/5) which indicates that the ditches continued to collect material well into the 4th century. The lower fills of later enclosure ditch 628 produced South-East Dorset BB1 forms and Oxfordshire mortaria typical of the 3rd and 4th centuries, whilst the upper fills contained sherds of late Roman shell-tempered ware and Oxfordshire colour-coated forms with white paint and stamped rosettes which show that the ditch was still open into the second half of the 4th century.

The ditches of enclosure 258 produced South-East Dorset BB1 flanged bowls and Oxfordshire colour-coated ware indicating that they filled up sometime after the mid 3rd century, while enclosure 267 produced late Roman shell-tempered ware and Oxfordshire colour-coated ware with stamped rosettes indicating once again that the ditch was still open into the second half of the 4th century.

No useful dating evidence was recovered from the trackways in Area 3, whilst the ditch system 450 and later enclosure 449 yielded only a few sherds of 2nd century or later manufacture. In Area 5 the ditches were still open in the late 3rd or 4th century as they produced Oxfordshire colour-coated ware.

FINDS

by E. M. McSloy

Pottery

The condition of the pottery is generally poor due to the effects of mildly acidic soils. The sherds were sorted into fabric type (based on the Cirencester fabric type series) and form in order to assess chronology, and quantified according to sherd count and weight (Table 1).

Fabric	Description	Count	% Count	Weight	% Weight
40	Dressel 20 Baetica	1	0.1%	79g	1.3%
74	S.E. Dorset BB1	120	15.4%	1003g	16.0%
118-120	Local imitation BB1 (late)	111	14.2%	774g	12.4%

117	Local Gritty Greyware (late)	4	0.5%	8g	0.1%
105	Local colour-coated ware	26	3.3%	197g	3.2%
98a	Micaceous greyware	35	4.5%	388g	6.2%
98	Miscellaneous greyware	290	37.1%	2171g	34.7%
83	Oxford red colour coat	25	3.2%	281g	4.5%
90	Oxford white ware	3	0.4%	88g	1.4%
84	Oxford white slipped mortaria	1	0.1%	29g	0.5%
115	Late Shelly ware	14	1.8%	51g	0.8%
-	Samian (all types)	11	1.4%	34g	0.5%
6	Savernake ware	1	0.1%	5g	0.1%
98	Wiltshire oxidised ware	71	9.1%	569g	9.1%
98	Wiltshire reduced ware	69	8.8%	578g	9.2%
Total		782	-	6255g	-

Table 1. Roman pottery by fabric type

Sources

Much of the Roman pottery consists of utilitarian sandy reduced wares (75.4% by weight). South-East Dorset black-burnished ware (BB1) accounts for 16% of the assemblage with a typical later Roman suite of forms represented, comprising everted-rim jars, flanged bowls and plain-rimmed dishes. The remainder of the greyware assemblage, including micaceous type (98a), consists of material most likely of local north Wiltshire or possibly Cirencester manufacture. Coarse, dark grey to black fabric 118-120 matches the description of imitation Dorset BB1 known from Cirencester. BB1 influence is also evident in much of the other greywares with everted-rim jars, lattice decoration and bead and flanged bowls present. A small proportion of the greyware, including necked jar forms with shoulder cordons, is identifiable with products from Whitehill Farm, near Swindon (Anderson 1980). The Savernake industry is poorly represented with only a single sherd identifiable. The

small quantity of late Roman shell-tempered ware most probably derives from the Harrold kilns of north Bedfordshire. The most likely source for the oxidised coarsewares is the same north Wiltshire industry thought to be the source for the bulk of the reduced coarsewares. Of note here are two bowl forms copying samian form Drag. 38. Mortaria are without exception of Oxfordshire manufacture with white, white-slipped and red colour-coated types represented.

The commonest fineware is Oxfordshire red colour-coated bowls. 'Local' brown colour-coated ware also occurs, predominantly as bowls copying Oxfordshire types, although beakers also occur. A source for this fabric has yet to be established, although the concentration of findspots in the Cirencester/Gloucester area makes a local origin more than likely. Imported continental pottery is restricted to eleven sherds of ?central Gaulish samian ware and a single sherd of southern Spanish (Dressel 20 type) amphora.

Dating

The Roman pottery ranges in date from the 2nd century, with the latest pottery comprising shell-tempered ware which does not appear in the Cotswolds before c. AD 360. Dated features are predominately of 3rd or 4th-century date (see above). Distinctly 1st or 2nd-century pottery is poorly represented and in most instances such sherds are demonstrably residual in their context.

Stone

A single small, rectangular-sectioned, whetstone of Kentish Ragstone was recovered from an upper fill of enclosure 629 (stone identification by Fiona Roe). Ragstone hones of similar form and size are common finds on Roman sites across southern Britain. A quantity of stone roof tile, of probable Roman date and seventeen stone tesserae of both large (in excess of 25 x 25mm) and small (10 x 10mm) size were also found, almost entirely in Area 2.

Ceramic Building Material

Roman ceramic building material, weighing 4096g, came primarily from Area 2. This included *tegula*, *imbrex*, combed box-flue tile and brick. Two tile tesserae were also found.

Worked Flint

Ten pieces of worked flint were recovered in generally good condition with little post-depositional damage. A leaf-shaped arrowhead from Area 3 is dateable to the earlier Neolithic (Green 1980) but was residual in its context. The remaining material was also residual and comprised two end/side scrapers and seven flakes probably dating to the later Neolithic or Bronze Age.

Glass

Five fragments of glass include one green-coloured fragment which is likely to derive from a late Roman tableware vessel.

Coins

Two coins found in Area 2 preserve no surface detail although their general form makes a later Roman (c. AD 280-400) date highly likely.

Copper Alloy

Three fragments of a bracelet of 'crenellated' form were found in the fill of a furrow. Bracelets of this type are known locally from Wanborough (Hooley 2001, No. 35). Other examples from Shakenoak, Oxfordshire (Brodrigg *et al.* 1971, No. 104) and Colchester (Crummy 1983, No.1659) are dated to the late 3rd century and AD 320-450 respectively.

Iron

Twenty-six items of iron were retrieved, including eighteen nails. A double-spiked loop belongs to a class of artefact, almost certainly serving as structural fittings, which are very common on Romano-British sites of all kinds (Manning 1985, 130). The remaining items consist of strip or square-sectioned bar fragments, a probable chain-link and a ring.

Industrial residues

A small quantity of miscellaneous ironworking slag consists of largely amorphous, blocky material composed mainly of iron silicate. Similar material can be produced by iron smithing or smelting (Starley 2001, 9-10).

DISCUSSION

The discovery of a previously unrecorded Roman villa during pipeline construction serves as yet another reminder of our incomplete knowledge of the Roman settlement pattern in the north Wiltshire clay vale and southern Cotswolds (see Corney 2001, fig. 2.1 for the most up to date map of villas and other forms of settlement in this area). It is telling that when opportunistic fieldwork takes place in association with linear developments such as pipelines new sites are invariably found. A watching brief along the 12km length of the Littleton Drew to Chippenham gas pipeline recorded two Romano-British sites, one of which had no previous record (Bateman 2000). Development-led work associated with the growth of Chippenham is also yielding new sites (Bateman and Enright 2000; *WANHM* 94 (2001), 246-7).

The new villa at Marsh Farm, Malmesbury lies 5km from the Fosse Way and the roadside settlement at White Walls/Easton Grey which contained structures of status (Corney 2001, 23-6). A trackway visible from aerial photographs might indicate

a minor Roman route running eastwards along the Avon valley towards Malmesbury where a Roman hypocaust is said to have been found to the east of the Abbey in 1887 (*Archaeological Journal* 44, 53). Further work is required to confirm the presence of a villa or other form of Romano-British site beneath the medieval town, although it is of note that Roman pottery has been found residually in medieval deposits during recent archaeological investigations at the former cinema site and Abbey Grounds.

Turning to the morphology of the Marsh Farm site, geophysics clearly shows a focus of one or more stone-built structures, with ditched enclosures and trackways to the west. During fieldwalking pottery dating predominately to the 1st-2nd century AD was recovered from the area of enclosures, whilst wares characteristic of the 3rd and 4th centuries were found closer to the main structures (Network Archaeology 2001, Appendix D). It is conceivable therefore that the site originated in the early Roman period as a farmstead of timber or dry-stone buildings set in enclosures and paddocks. A ditched trackway led to the south-west towards the river Avon, suggesting arable cultivation on the better drained gravels nearer to the farm with seasonal grazing in the river valley. Sometime in the 3rd or 4th century a stone-built villa house equipped with one or more hypocausts and tessellated pavements was constructed to the east of the paddocks. The geophysics indicates a range of rooms running north-east to south-west, with a possible second building to the south-east. The complex may therefore have consisted of a L-shaped arrangement of two buildings, or perhaps even three buildings set around a south-east facing courtyard (any possible structure to the north-east would have lain outside the area surveyed, but may have been cut through by the telecommunications trench). Anomalies associated with the demolition of the north-western structure extend over a distance of up to 100m long, although demolition material invariably spreads well beyond the extent of the ground plan of a building. Two possible parallel walls, 10m apart, can be observed running for a distance of in excess of 30m on a north-east to south-west

alignment. They might define part of one structure. A range c. 30 to 50m in length would be comparable with Cotswold villas such as Barnsley Park near Cirencester. Indeed comparison might be drawn more generally with Barnsley Park where extensive excavation has demonstrated that a farmstead (complete with a four-post structure like that found in Area 3 and a timber house) originated in the mid 2nd century. A stone-built winged corridor villa house was not added until some two hundred years later around AD 360 (Webster 1981; Webster and Smith 1982; see also Smith 1985). It is conceivable that further work at this site might elucidate a similar sequence.

Acknowledgements

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CAPTIONS

Figure 1 Site Location

Figure 2. Magnetometer plot and areas of archaeological investigation

Figure 3. Magnetic susceptibility plot

Figure 4. Area 2: plan

Figure 5. Area 3: plan

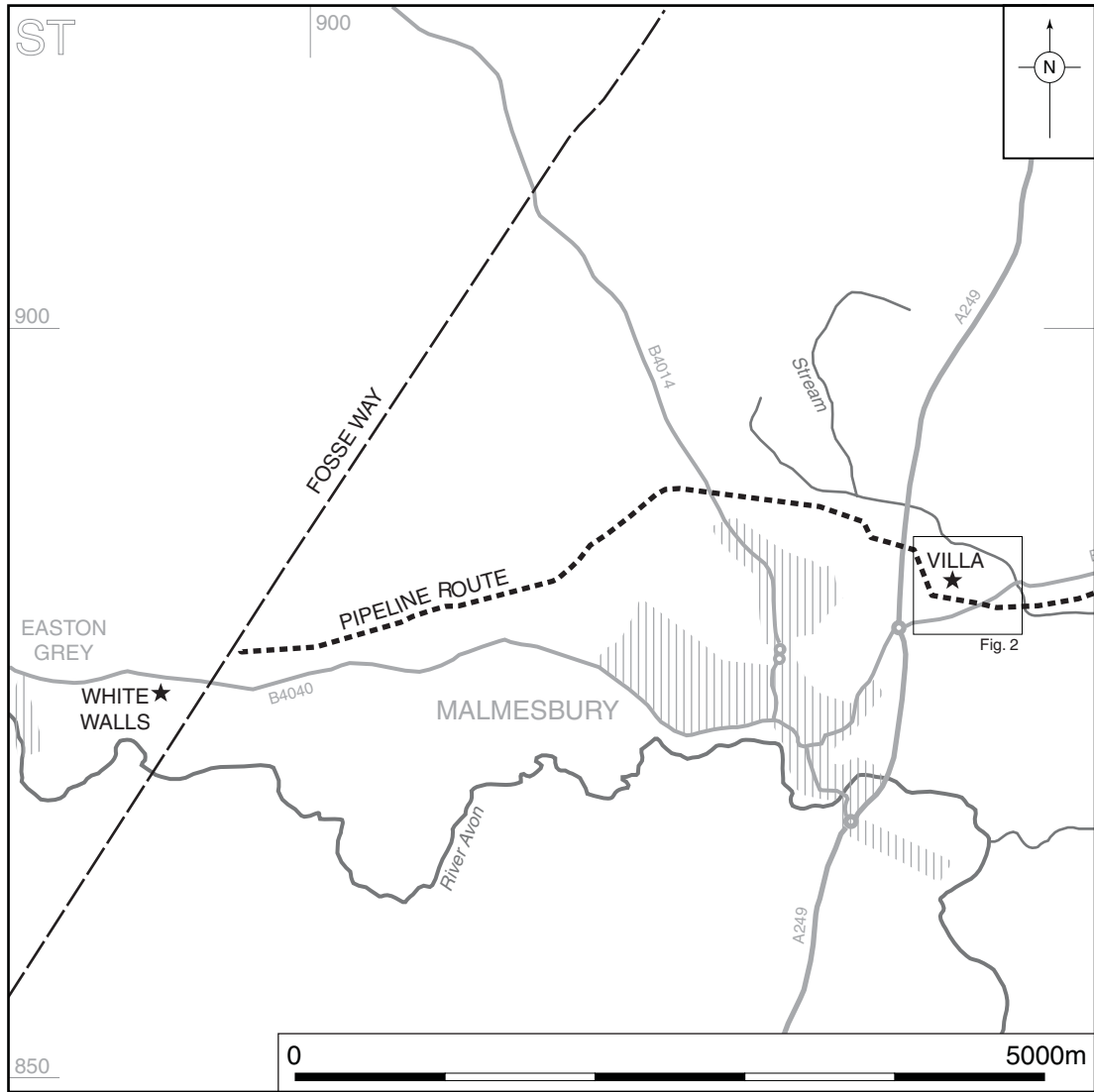


Fig. 1 Site location (1:50,000)

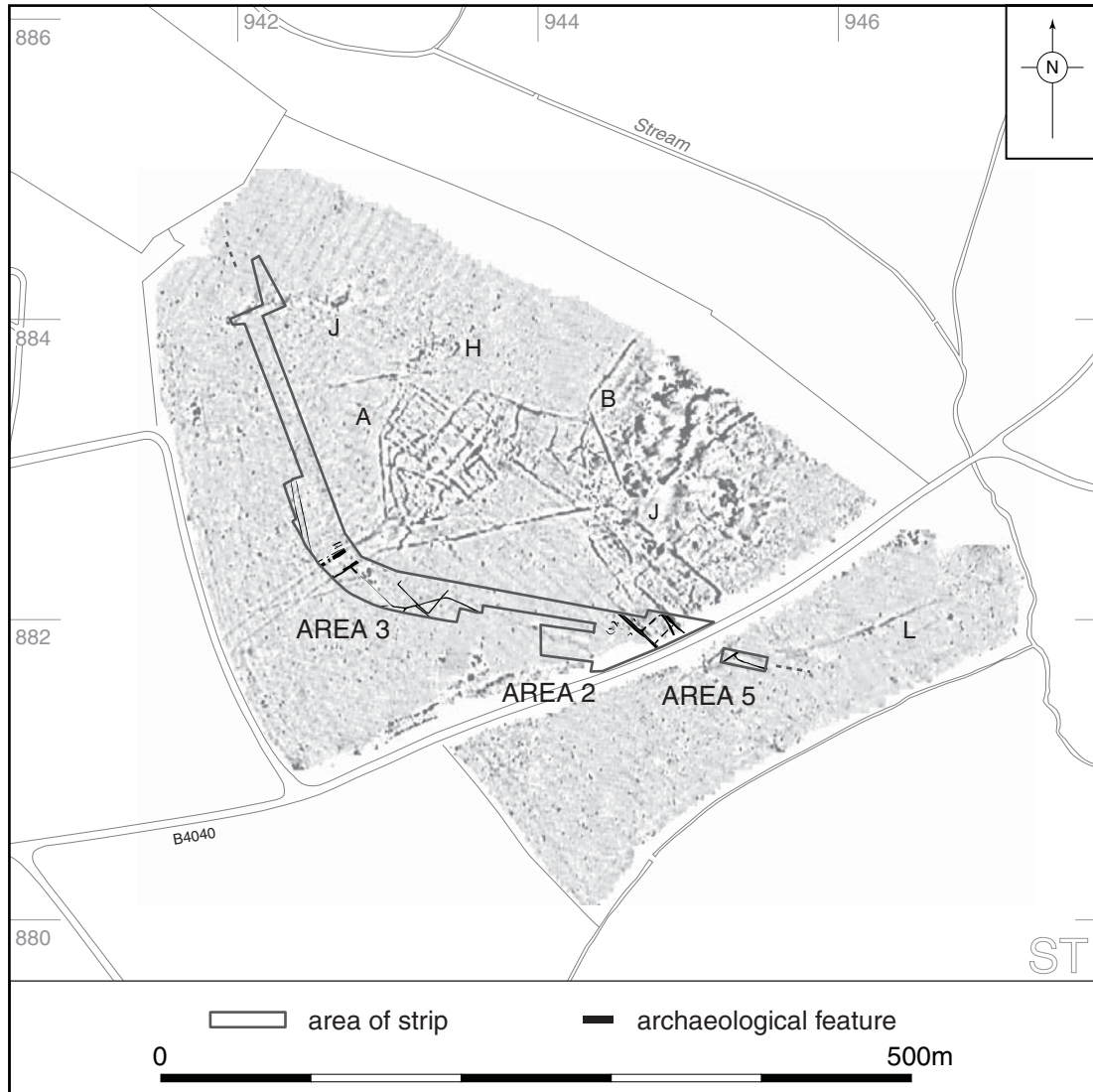


Fig. 2 Magnetometer plot and areas of archaeological investigation (1:5000)

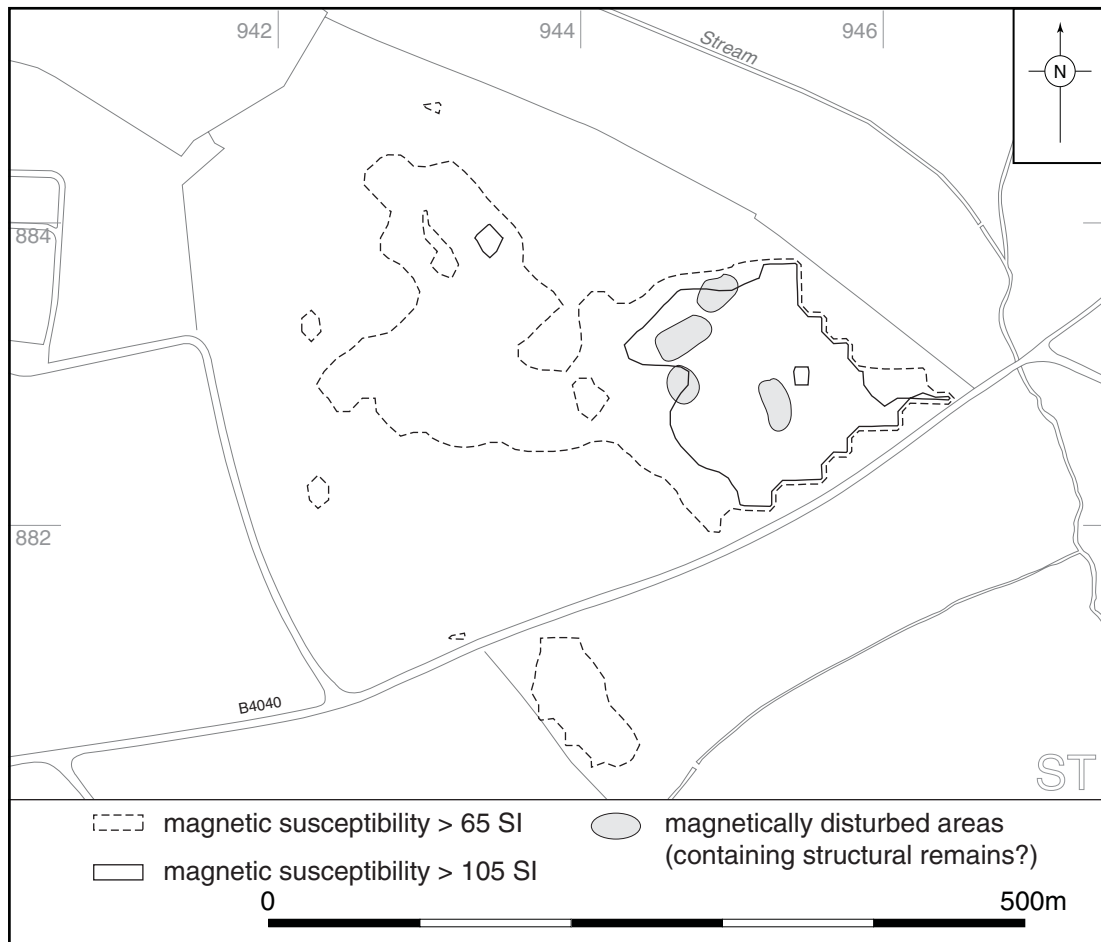


Fig. 3 Magnetic susceptibility plot (1:5000)

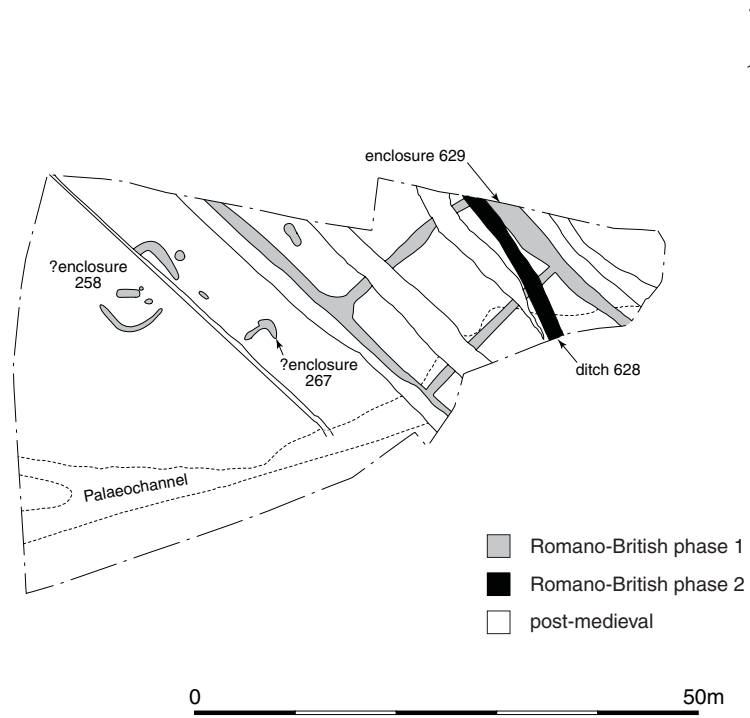


Fig. 4 Area 2: plan

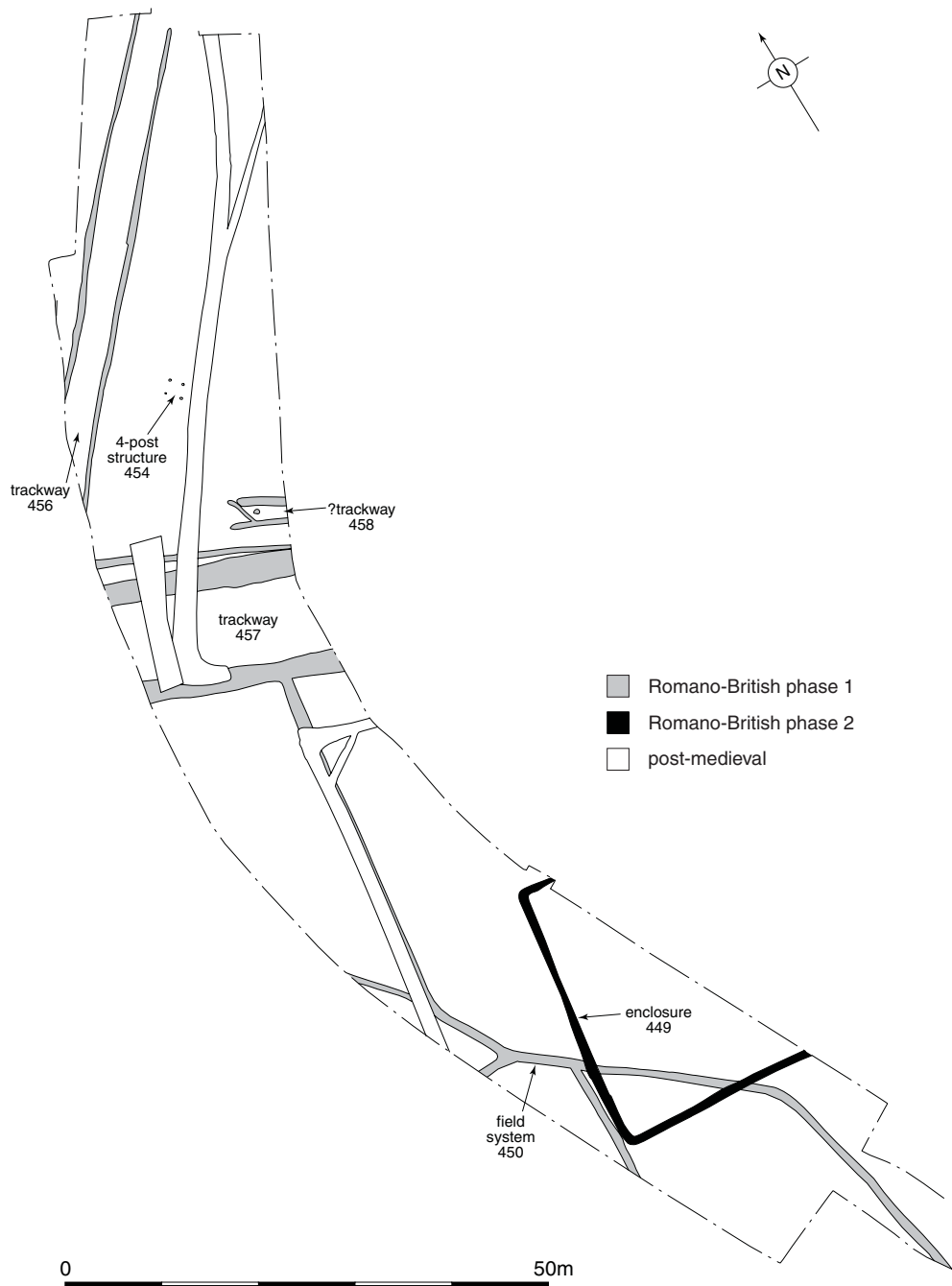


Fig. 5 Area 3: plan